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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a study of three states (Maryland, Massachusetts, and Texas) that investigated their policies and practices imvolving standards, assessment, accountability, teaching quality, and public engagement. It focuses on common conditions contributing to success in raising achievement (consistency, consensus, and comprehensiveness); different paths to success (standards from the start, high-profile tests, transparency, consequences for performance, low-performing schools, teacher quality, and capacity building); challenges ahead; time line of reform; and policy review teams. Overall, the states make clear that reform is not easy or quick. Each has been at it for at least 10 years. Early on, each embraced the fundamental tenets of standards-based reform. However, they also show that there are different ways to bring these tenets to life through state policy. In Texas, district and school leaders made concerted efforts to develop a coherent curriculum and strengthen instruction based on it, stressing the capacity building of educators. In Massachusetts, research found that 9 out of 10 administrators and teachers made changes in curriculum in response to assessment results. Maryland's assessment was entirely performance based, with no multiple-choice questions. As in Massachusetts and Texas, Maryland's use of assessment data to change teaching produced significant achievement gains. (SM)

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Standards-Based Reform in Maryland, Massachusetts and Texas

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Achieve is an independent, bipartisan, nonprofit organization created by governors and corporate leaders to help states and the private sector raise standards and performance in America's schools. Founded at the 1996 National Education Summit, Achieve has sponsored two additional Summits in 1999 and 2001.

Achieve helps states raise academic standards, measure performance against those standards, establish clear accountability for results and strengthen public confidence in our education system. To do this, it:

- ☐ helps states **benchmark** their standards, assessments and accountability systems against the best in the country and the world;
- ☐ provides sustained **public leadership** and advocacy for the movement to raise standards and improve student performance;
- ☐ builds **partnerships** that allow states to work together to improve teaching and learning and raise student achievement; and
- ☐ serves as a **national clearinghouse** on education standards and school reform.

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Three Paths, One Destination

Standards-Based Reform in Maryland, Massachusetts and Texas

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A New Urgency

While states have been working to raise academic standards for more than a decade, policymakers and educators have found a new sense of urgency in recent years. The aim of boosting achievement across the board has been matched by a renewed commitment to closing the persistent achievement gap among students of different backgrounds.

This sense of urgency was evident at National Education Summits in 1996, 1999 and 2001, at which governors, business leaders and educators recognized that, in concert with challenging standards and high-quality tests, states must provide the support to teachers and students that will result in higher achievement. This urgency also is clearly at the heart of the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Virtually every state will have to retool their standards, tests and accountability systems in the coming years to satisfy the provisions of this new law in ways that could help "raise the bar" and close the gap.

These changes will require significant effort in many states. Fortunately, there are states whose experiences offer valuable guidance. Last year, leaders in three such states — Maryland, Massachusetts and Texas — asked Achieve to conduct independent reviews of their policies and practices around standards, assessment, accountability, teaching quality and public engagement. In all, Achieve has benchmarked the standards and tests and reviewed school improvement policies in more than 15 states. The opportunity to study and report on three high-reform states — states that have amassed a record of successful, broadly implemented improvements — presented an unusual opportunity to explore key drivers of higher achievement. Taken together, the experiences of these three states create a picture of standards-based reform that can inform other states as they begin to make the tough choices that will be necessary over the next few years to raise standards and achievement.

These three states make clear that reform is not easy or quick; each of them has been at it for at least 10 years. Early on, each embraced the fundamental tenets of standards-based reform — setting expectations for students and schools, measuring performance against those standards, and demanding accountability for results. But they also show that there are different ways to bring these tenets to life through state policy. A critical challenge for states in implementing No Child Left Behind will be to avoid a one-size-fits-all mentality. States will need to step up their efforts, to be sure, but they are likely to find multiple approaches to reaching the admirable goal captured in the law's name.

Achieving Results

Maryland, Massachusetts and Texas were among the first states to embrace standards-based reform. While they have maintained their fundamental reforms steadfastly through the years, these states also have shown considerable skill in making adjustments when needed, even in the face of vocal opposition.

Even more significantly, Maryland, Massachusetts and Texas merit attention because they have achieved results. Their policies are working. Their students are learning more.

While presidential politics made it well known, the Texas story bears repeating. Roughly eight in 10 Texas students passed all three sections of the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) in 2000, up from 56 percent in 1994. Black and Hispanic students have made the greatest gains, substantially closing the achievement gaps. For example, the proportion of black students passing the reading portion of TAAS rose twice as fast as the statewide increase for all students from 1994 to 2000. As a result, the gap between white and black passing rates was cut in half during that period.

Results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) confirm that these gains represent real improvements in achievement. Texas recorded among the highest gains of all states on the math NAEP in the 1990s. The state's black 8th graders outscored whites in seven states on the 1998 writing NAEP — a first for the "nation's report card."

Massachusetts garnered headlines last year when results for the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) test showed dramatic jumps in the passing rate for the class of 2003 — the first students for which passing the test was a graduation requirement. In 2001, the percentage of 10th graders passing the math section of MCAS was more than half again as large as when the test was given for the first time in 1998 — 75 percent compared to just 48 percent when students faced no stakes. Similarly, the passing rate for the English section was up to 82 percent last year from 72 percent two years earlier.

The strong performance has not been limited to high schools. Last spring, two-thirds of the Bay State's 3rd graders scored at the proficient level on the reading MCAS. Only 5 percent fell to the "warning" level — the lowest performance category.

Again, NAEP results reinforce the portrait created by state assessment results. In reading, no state outperformed Massachusetts at the 8th grade level, and only one state — Connecticut — had better 4th-grade results. In math, a third of Massachusetts' 4th and 8th graders performed at the proficient level or above in 2000, up from 24 percent in 1996.

Student achievement in Maryland improved as well in the 1990s. The state saw the percentage of students scoring at the satisfactory level on its challenging assessment, the Maryland School Performance Assessment Program (MSPAP), grow to 45 percent in 2000 — roughly a 50 percent increase in students reaching that bar compared to 1993. The Baltimore City School District, which has been the state's lowest performing school system, achieved four successive years of improved results, with the biggest jump coming in 2000.

Maryland also showed gains on the math NAEP, registering among the largest increases in 8th-grade performance in the 1990s. The state also was one of only a handful to improve its 4th-grade reading NAEP results between 1994 and 1998.

Improvements Where They Matter Most

These impressive gains came about because the state reforms did what they were supposed to do: provide incentives and support to help schools and classrooms change instruction for the better. Although some critics have dismissed the achievement gains as narrow "teaching to the test," there is evidence from all three states that parents, teachers, students and others took reform seriously and worked hard to strengthen the quality of teaching and learning. The achievement gains reflect this improvement.

There is considerable evidence of improved instruction in each of the states. In Texas, a study by the Charles A. Dana Center at the University of Texas at Austin examined four school districts with high proportions of low-income and minority students that performed exceptionally well on state tests. In each of the districts, researchers found district and school leaders made concerted efforts to develop a coherent curriculum and strengthen instruction based on it. They stressed building the capacity of educators, particularly in using achievement data to guide instruction. These districts focused on improvements in the classroom, which resulted in higher student performance.

The Achieve review team found other evidence that standards have been used to improve the quality of teaching in Texas. Educators and other stakeholders were very familiar with the state standards — the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) — not just the state test. They used the standards to develop lesson plans and teaching tools, and in some cases districts even created their own diagnostic assessments to provide more frequent student performance information. Examples like these illustrate that Texas educators who embraced the standards were able to push reforms beyond any limits of the TAAS tests.

The story is similar in Massachusetts. A report for the Massachusetts Education Reform Review Commission found that more than nine out of 10 superintendents, principals and teachers reported making changes in curriculum in response to MCAS results, and nearly as many had changed instruction. But these changes were not aimed at narrow test preparation. The study found that many schools had strengthened writing instruction and many had used more open-response questions in class — the kind of "authentic" teaching that leads to higher-level thinking skills and improved learning.

Educators in Watertown, MA, confirmed the Achieve review team's findings of considerable resources directed toward strengthening instruction, particularly for struggling students. For example, the district assigned its strongest teachers to after-school tutorials for low-performing students.

Maryland stands out among the three states reviewed and nationally in using the state assessment to change the nature of teaching and learning in elementary and middle schools. Rather than measure what is, MSPAP aimed to move schools toward what should be in terms of instruction. The sophisticated assessment was entirely performance based; it contained no multiple-choice questions.

Like Texas and Massachusetts, the record in Maryland shows that using the assessment data to change teaching produced significant gains in student achievement. A survey of Maryland principals conducted in 1998 for the Maryland State Department of Education found that 97 percent said MSPAP promoted writing across subjects other than English, 88 percent said it encouraged teachers to use performance tasks in instruction, and 91 percent said the test encouraged reading in all subject areas. In addition, 86 percent of the principals said that MSPAP had an impact on teaching and learning in all grades, not just the three grades in which the test was given.

Similarly, a study by the University of Pittsburgh found that the vast majority of Maryland classrooms emphasized writing and math problem-solving — activities vital to the state test. The research found that students in classrooms where the test influenced instruction performed better on MSPAP.

Common Conditions Contributing to Success

Maryland, Massachusetts and Texas share several conditions that have undoubtedly contributed to the success of their reforms. These conditions can be summed up in three words — consistency, consensus and comprehensiveness.

Consistency

In all three states, standards-based reform has been remarkably consistent over time. This is unusual in state policy. Often policies shift frequently, because different actors within state government either adopt policies that are inconsistent with one another or change direction with each new set of policymakers. Frequent shifts in state policy do little good in schools. Educators either ignore the policies, knowing they will not last, or they get whipsawed lurching from one new policy to another, never developing a coherent strategy for improvement.

Maryland, Massachusetts and Texas maintained focus because policymakers shared common goals at the outset and sustained direction over time, even through changes in leadership. Consider Maryland: The basic blueprint for the state's reforms was laid out in a 1989 report, known as the Sondheim Commission report, commissioned by then-Governor William Donald Shaeffer. The report called for an emphasis on results and student achievement, rather than educational inputs, revolutionizing the curriculum taught in schools by focusing on advanced critical thinking skills, measuring performance against the lofty goals with common assessments and increasing accountability of public education to Maryland taxpayers. These recommendations have guided reform in Maryland ever since.

In part, this stability reflects the steady hand of Nancy Grasmick, who has served as state education superintendent since 1991 and who has guided the implementation of reforms and the development of augmentations through legislative and gubernatorial turnover.

In Texas, the stability has been even more remarkable. The Lone Star State's education reforms date back to 1984, when a commission headed by Ross Perot outlined a sweeping set of recommendations — including the famous "no pass, no play" rule affecting participation in athletics and other extracurricular activities — that were adopted despite vocal opposition. State leaders have maintained support for reforms through the administrations of five governors — two Democrats and three Republicans. Though the state added additional components to the system — statewide tests in grades 3 through 8 and high school, reports on student achievement by ethnic group and socioeconomic status, and standards for student promotion — it did so gradually and within the context of the broader school improvement agenda. Educators, parents and community members throughout the state knew what was coming, understood the ground rules, and accepted these changes as part of a larger effort to raise standards and achievement.

Massachusetts' reforms also have stayed consistent over nearly a decade. The blueprint for the reforms was laid out in a 1991 report by the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education, *Every Child a Winner*. Two years later, comprehensive legislation was enacted and has remained in place since then despite changes in governors and state chiefs and despite criticisms from a vocal minority. The 1993 law affected virtually every aspect of education in the commonwealth. At its heart was an agreement that stronger accountability for results should be accompanied by significant increases in resources. This is one important reason why achievement, though initially low, has increased substantially.

In all three states, the consistency of policies has created an environment that encourages districts and schools to make deep, long-term changes in classroom practice, rather than grab onto the latest educational fad. This has helped broaden and deepen public understanding and support for reforms as citizens see the reward for their diligence — greater student achievement.

Consensus

Consistency is hard to achieve without consensus. There can be little doubt that the stability the education systems in Maryland, Massachusetts and Texas have enjoyed is a direct result of the broad, bipartisan support for the reform agenda in each state that reaches across three key sectors — government, business and education. The standards agenda in all three states is not associated with a particular political party or branch of government; leaders on both sides of the aisle are invested in making the reforms work. The business communities in all three states also have provided crucial support. And at least in Maryland and Texas, both the K–12 and higher education communities, have been actively involved in shaping the reforms. In Massachusetts, however, relations between state policymakers, especially the state board of education and the education community have often been contentious. Unlike their counterparts in Maryland and Texas, Massachusetts educators have not felt adequately included in shaping reforms.

Maryland succeeded in staying its course because reforms proposed in 1989 were widely endorsed in the state, including partners from business and higher education providing considerable support to keep them in place. The Maryland Business Roundtable focused the state business community on standards-based reform throughout the 1990s. Among other efforts, the group led campaigns to communicate to high school students and parents about the importance of academic achievement and the state's reforms. In addition, college and university faculty and leaders have been supportive of K–12 improvement in Maryland. Through a K–16 partnership, higher education shared its expertise in the development of K–12 standards and high school graduation tests.

In Texas, as in Maryland, the business community has been a major factor in bringing consistency to the education agenda. Through organizations such as the Texas Business Education Coalition, Texans for Education and the Governor's Business Council, the state's private sector has held firm on the importance of standards, testing and accountability. In addition, state leaders have sought the involvement of educators in the development of the policies and have generally listened to and responded to their concerns, thus winning their support for the system. For example, the effort to create a new testing system started with educator committees, who defined expectations for what students should know and be able to do for each of the state standards, drawing on surveys of 27,000 educators across the state. Officials used the results of the committees and surveys to refine the test objectives.

Texas leaders also have made considerable efforts to inform and win the support of the public by making the standards, tests and student results among the most visible in the United States. Every complete test is posted on the Texas Education Agency Web site immediately after its administration, as are test scores and accountability ratings for every school and district.

In Massachusetts, there also has been remarkable political consensus on the fundamental principles behind the education reforms. This sometimes gets obscured by the media's preoccupation with the protests and objections of a vocal minority opposed to the high stakes associated with the reforms. But a careful look across the political spectrum reveals bipartisan, broad-based support for the 1993 reform law and its continued implementation. Although few original sponsors and backers of the law are still in their jobs, their successors have maintained support for it.

In addition to the role played by the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education, a second business-led group, MassInsight Education, has been a leader in highlighting the expectations for student performance and the success stories of schools that have leveraged the standards to raise achievement.

Worth noting is that in both Massachusetts and Texas, the tests and accountability provisions that have become hallmarks of reform arose as trade-offs for additional funding. In Massachusetts, the blueprint for reform came with a price tag attached. In Texas, legislators resolved a school finance fight by upping the state's contribution to education spending while demanding more accountability for results.

The importance of unified state leadership in these three states cannot be understated. It is, Achieve believes, a major contributing factor to their successes. In other states, including some with which Achieve has worked, the lack of bipartisan support for standards and accountability, or the lack of cooperation among the governor, chief state school officer, state board of education and legislature, threatens the long-term viability of the standards agenda.

Consensus, however, should not be confused with unanimous support. In Massachusetts, the state's largest teachers' union carried out a $600,000 advertising campaign against MCAS. Political, business and higher education support for the reforms made it possible for the state to weather these vocal challenges.

Comprehensiveness

A third major reason why these three states have been able to accomplish so much is that their reforms have been comprehensive. Although much of the media attention in each state has focused on tests and accountability, there is, in fact, little in education that the state reforms did not touch. Of course, tests and accountability played a major role in providing information and incentives that led to improvement in student achievement. But the improvements also reflect changes in teacher quality, curriculum, student support and other areas.

In many respects, the reforms in Maryland, Massachusetts and Texas represent good examples of the "horse trade" the National Governors Association first proposed in 1986: states would hold schools accountable for results, but provide them with the flexibility and resources needed to achieve the results. Although most states have been aggressive at implementing accountability measures, not all have done as much as these three to keep their end of the bargain to provide the necessary resources and support to sustain a comprehensive approach to reform.

Massachusetts, for example, has doubled state spending on education since 1993, a remarkable accomplishment in a state dominated by local, rather than state, control. Many of the increased investments have targeted areas most critical to improving academic results. The state legislature provided $170 million over four years for the Academic Support Services program, which sends funds to districts with the largest proportion of low-performing students and earmarks funds for elementary students struggling with reading. The sustained funding provided opportunities for comprehensive support to students and schools.

In Maryland, the increase in support tied to a demand for results was evident in its effort to create a new governance arrangement in Baltimore city, the district with the largest proportion of disadvantaged students and one with persistently low rates of achievement. A 1996 law gave the state more control over the management of the Baltimore city schools. In return, the legislature provided $232 million over five years to the district, raising district funds above the state average for the first time.

Maryland also made good on the horse trade in 2002, when the state legislature approved a $1.3 billion increase in state aid to local school districts, particularly poorer districts. This increase, which will boost state aid by more than one-third by 2008, was predicated on helping all students meet the state standards. Legislators passed it without the rancor or court battles seen in other states.

In Texas, the additional resources have resulted in a notable and unusual degree of alignment among standards, tests, curriculum, instruction, teacher preparation and professional development. As a result, all the levers of state policy are moving schools in the same direction, which goes a long way toward explaining the substantial achievement gains.

The systemic nature of these state policies shows that the reforms are not separate from accountability; rather, the policies are complementary. There can be no resources without accountability; the public has a right to expect that their tax dollars will produce results. At the same time, there can be no accountability without resources. States cannot set students and schools up for failure.

Different Paths to Success

Standards, testing and accountability have defined the education reform agendas in Maryland, Massachusetts and Texas for the last decade, and each has pursued these reforms with a remarkable degree of success. While the states each used the same three-part strategy, the tactics they chose varied a great deal. Each state faced a unique set of circumstances and made different choices along the way. The different paths the three states took suggest that there is more than one right way to achieve high standards.

Standards from the Start

The heart of standards-based reform lies in setting standards — determining what students need to know and be able to do. That is the most important step toward school improvement. Virtually all states, including Maryland, Massachusetts and Texas, have adopted content standards, that outline the knowledge and skills all students should possess. Although the quality of the standards across the states varies considerably, the goal in each state has been to use the standards to drive improvements in curriculum and instruction. The standards also have served as the basis for the testing and accountability systems.

Although Maryland, Massachusetts and Texas all have had standards in place since the beginning of their reform efforts, it is instructive to note how much they have changed over time. All three states began with standards that were broader and less specific than the ones in place. All three have raised the level of rigor in their standards as well.

The standards in Massachusetts, known as curriculum frameworks, were first developed in the mid-1990s. After intensive efforts to gather reactions from teachers and others in the state, the state emerged with a very strong set of standards. In fact, Achieve uses the English language arts frameworks as benchmarks against which to compare those of other states. The standards are clear and provide adequate guidance to teachers, they are rigorous and suggest a clear progression of knowledge and skills over time, and they emphasize challenging but appropriate content.

In Maryland, the standards were defined very loosely at the outset in deference to local control of schools. But as schools recognized that they were being held accountable for improving results, they began to demand greater precision and clarity. The state revised its standards in the late 1990s to provide more specific guidance. Standards that previously emphasized only general themes or skills, for example, became infused with key content and concepts. The state has more work to do in this regard, but progress has been made.

In the late 1990s, Texas also strengthened its standards. The state moved from standards that covered clusters of grades to standards for each grade in order to make them more useful to teachers, parents and students. The standards also became more focused and more challenging.

These three states show that it is possible to take different paths in clarifying and improving standards over time without disrupting the accountability system. Other states have accomplished this recently as well: Indiana, Ohio and Oregon each have revised their standards over the last few years and Achieve now considers their standards in some subjects to be among the best in the nation.

As the testing and accountability provisions of No Child Left Behind are implemented, all states will need clear standards that articulate the expectations they have for their students and schools. Otherwise, the tests will become the de facto standards, and teaching to the test will become the norm.

High-Profile Tests

Although Maryland, Massachusetts and Texas have worked hard to focus the attention of educators and the public on standards, their tests have taken on a higher profile. MCAS, MSPAP and TAAS became synonymous with the states' reforms and, as a result, they have been heavily scrutinized.

Significantly, all three states began by building their own tests, rather than buying tests off-the-shelf. Their goal was to create a tight alignment between the standards and the assessments. Although commercial tests provide some important information, they are unlikely to fully measure any one state's standards, because they are produced for use in many states. To be sure, even tests that are constructed to measure a state's standards may fall short of complete alignment. In the past three years, Achieve has conducted reviews of alignment of standards and tests in a dozen states and has found few examples of tests that truly measure the depth and breadth of what states expect all children to learn.

In this regard, Massachusetts stands out as exemplary. Massachusetts officials asked Achieve to analyze the quality of the state math and English standards and the alignment of the 10th-grade MCAS to those standards. Our results showed that the state has developed high-quality standards and high-quality tests, and there is tight alignment between the two. In fact, we found MCAS to be among the best tests Achieve has reviewed in the United States. It measures a broad range of standards and does so in challenging ways. Students need to be able to read and write thoughtfully to do well on the English language arts test, and they need to demonstrate their understanding of both basic and advanced mathematics to do well on the math test. Moreover, educators throughout the state are hard-pressed to articulate what students should know that is not on MCAS. The reason is simple: the test measures important knowledge and skills.

While Achieve was not asked to conduct a similar analysis of MSPAP, the experts who carried out Achieve's policy review in Maryland spoke with a variety of stakeholders about the impact the assessment had on teaching and learning. In many ways, MSPAP was stronger and more prominent than the state standards, and served as the primary driver of teaching and learning in the state. In the absence of specific guidance from weak standards (that have since been replaced), MSPAP attempted to change the nature of teaching and learning in Maryland schools. The test's emphasis on higher-level skills was designed to encourage schools to reinvent curriculum and to inject problem-solving and reasoning exercises into all subjects. The test had detractors; some viewed the test and the way it was scored as subjective and questioned its quality. But the Achieve review team found that most educators and citizens believed it was "worth teaching to."

Despite this praise, MSPAP had weaknesses. Because of its design, MSPAP could provide results for schools and school districts, but not for individual students. So while students sat through hours of testing each year, neither they nor their parents received any results detailing their individual performance. This became particularly problematic as the state moved toward a system of high school graduation exams that all students would be expected to pass. In order for schools to prepare students for more challenging tests in high school, the state had to find a way to provide information on how each student was performing in elementary and middle school.

Maryland is replacing MSPAP with a new test to respond to these concerns. The state is working to ensure that the new test aligns with the new standards and continues the practice, started by MSPAP, of driving instruction in positive ways. Given the demands of No Child Left Behind, the time line for the transition must be short. As a result, Maryland opted to augment existing norm-referenced tests to create a closer fit with its standards. The state asked Achieve to help it identify the gaps between tests and standards so that specific language could be built into its contract with test publishers to close them. Getting this right will be challenging, but critical to the future of Maryland's reforms.

Texas faces a similar challenge. While Achieve did not study TAAS in depth, Texans generally accept that, in contrast to MCAS and MSPAP, their tests measured relatively low-level knowledge and skills. In fact, a federal judge found that the high school exit TAAS measures what amounts to 8th-grade knowledge and skills in upholding its use as a graduation requirement. The state has developed a new test — the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) — that it has worked to align to its current standards. The challenge for Texas is to ensure the new assesment measueres what all students are expected to learn, not simply what they are already being taught. In this way, the state can stretch schools and students toward higher performance.

Transparency

Given that Maryland, Massachusetts and Texas all attach stakes for schools and students to the test results, the high profile that the tests took on comes as no surprise. The experience in other states has been the same.

To keep attention focused on the standards, all three states redoubled their efforts to clarify the standards and to develop additional teaching tools and resources based on the standards. When it came to defending their tests, Texas and Massachusetts decided that the best strategy was to make them public. Both states release all of their test items to the public after each year's tests have been administered. This helps reduce the mystery associated with the tests and it allows parents, educators and the public to judge them for themselves. It also helps educators make sense of the test results.

While virtually all states make standards publicly available, few states have gone as far as these two to make tests visible. Releasing full tests each year is an expensive undertaking; states have to build completely new tests each year as the test questions are no longer secure. Yet officials in Texas and Massachusetts would argue that the investment is a wise one. By making the tests transparent, Texas and Massachusetts may have contributed to the high profile nature of the tests. But they also have built goodwill among educators and broader support from the public.

Consequences for Performance

Perhaps the most striking difference among the reforms in Maryland, Massachusetts and Texas is the path each took to drive higher performance.

Texas always has maintained a balanced accountability system. Both schools and students are accountable for their performance. Schools know that their annual accountability ratings are based largely on TAAS (and now TAKS) passing rates. They can earn rewards if they have high ratings and be subject to sanctions if their ratings are low. Students, meanwhile, have to pass a high school exit test in order to graduate. More recently, Texas instituted a promotion policy requiring 4th graders to pass TAKS tests in order to move to the next grade.

This sort of shared accountability keeps students and adults working together to raise achievement. Students know that their teachers and administrators are striving to help them achieve — because the consequences fall on the adults if they fail to raise achievement. At the same time, the adults know that students are motivated to work hard as well and are doing their part to learn what they need to know to graduate.

In terms of both the proficiency students needed to demonstrate to pass TAAS and the expectations for schools' performance, Texas decided initially to meet children and adults close to where they were already performing and gradually raise the bar. In the first years of TAAS, roughly half of Texas students did not pass. For schools, "acceptable" performance required that only a quarter of their students pass the test. In both cases, the targets seemed attainable.

Texas chose to steadily increase expectations for school performance year by year, making clear from the start that the bar would continually be set higher. Last year, as the state phased out TAAS, 55 percent of students had to pass TAAS for a school to earn an acceptable rating, 80 percent for a recognized rating and 90 percent for the exemplary rating. Texas schools proved they could rise to the occasion. In the most recent ratings, more than half of Texas schools were rated recognized or exemplary.

In contrast to the Texas approach, Maryland initially set a very high bar for schools and has stuck with it over time. MSPAP represented a real challenge for schools, because it exclusively used open-ended questions and interdisciplinary tasks. MSPAP was a significant departure from the type of tests to which most students and schools had been accustomed, and from the way most students had been taught. Indeed, initial results were quite low: only 32 percent of students scored at the satisfactory level in 1993, and there were only 11 schools in which 70 percent of students scored at the satisfactory level — the state's goal for all schools.

While the hurdle was daunting, the state held the bar steady in the belief that it would in time push students and schools to improve. This happened, although not as fast as the state would have liked. In 2000, 45 percent of students reached the satisfactory level, and 83 schools reached the goal of 70 percent of students rated satisfactory.

By necessity, Maryland's approach to shared accountability also differed from Texas'. While both states held schools accountable, Maryland had no way to drive student accountability with a test that didn't maintain scores for individual students. The state relied on a minimum-competency high school exit exam that was not tied to its standards and that nearly every student passed on the first try.

In an unusual twist, Maryland policymakers instead turned the accountability lens on themselves. Maryland laid out a framework to provide resources and assistance to students and schools in a comprehensive plan known as Every Child Achieving. It provided support for struggling students, early intervention to help keep students from falling behind in the first place, and professional development for teachers to improve their skills and knowledge. This far-reaching plan was one of the first in the nation to commit state resources to helping all students meet challenging standards. When the legislature initially provided only part of the funding needed for the plan, state leaders postponed the start of new graduation requirements tied to new, more demanding high school end-of-course exams. The message was: If policymakers could not provide the support, they could not expect students to meet the higher standards. Earlier this year, legislators fully funded the plan as part of the $1.3 billion school aid package. As a result, Maryland is back on track to require graduates to pass the new exams.

Massachusetts is the only one of the three states to focus exclusively on student stakes. Beginning with the class of 2003, the state is requiring students pass the 10th-grade MCAS to graduate from high school. Although the expectations are high, the graduation requirement has focused attention on student performance like never before. It is no longer enough in Massachusetts to get by in school, and it is no longer enough for teachers and administrators to let students get by. Students need to accomplish something and demonstrate that they have.

This relatively simple proposition, which states around the nation are adopting, has profound ramifications. Students are taking their work seriously. Schools are adjusting their programs to ensure that students succeed. Districts and the state are providing resources to help students at risk of failure learn what they need to pass the tests. The results in Massachusetts speak for themselves. Although initial passing rates on the 10th-grade MCAS were very low, they rose sharply in 2001, the first year that the students taking the test knew that it would count as a graduation requirement.

Like Maryland, Massachusetts subscribed to the notion of starting with a high bar, although the stakes were for students, not schools. But the state also was practical in the manner of Texas. Although MCAS does have a "proficient" level, the state decided that it would be too high to use as a cut score for graduation and set a lower initial passing score. Massachusetts expects to raise the cut score on MCAS as greater numbers of students master the test.

Despite the success Massachusetts has experienced so far, legitimate questions have been raised about whether it is fair to hold students accountable without doing the same for the adults in the system. Although schools have not been directly held accountable in the past, that will likely change as a result of No Child Left Behind. The federal law requires states to hold each school accountable for annual progress on the state tests.

Low-Performing Schools

By far, the most perplexing policy question these states and others face is what to do about low-performing schools. This has been a challenge for states to date, and it will become an even greater challenge in the future as the federal law ups the ante for school performance and state responsibility for ensuring it.

Maryland has been a national leader in this area by refusing to tolerate continued failure. While a number of states, including Massachusetts and Texas, have laws on the books authorizing them to impose sanctions on chronically failing schools, Maryland is one of the few states that has actually used this authority.

Maryland's first step was to create a new governance arrangement in Baltimore, the district with the largest proportion of disadvantaged students and one with persistently low rates of achievement. In a landmark partnership adopted in 1996, the state legislature created a new entity that appointed a new school board and hired a new "CEO" as superintendent. At the same time, the legislature provided $232 million over five years to the district, raising district funds above the state average for the first time.

In 2000, the state turned over to a private firm the management of three continually low-performing elementary schools. The following year, the state did the same in a fourth school. These actions helped ensure that students in these schools would not remain trapped in a cycle of low performance by giving new managers a chance to turn them around. At the same time, these actions put other schools on notice that the state will step in if they continue to fail.

Most of the stakeholders the Achieve review team met with in Maryland consider this arrangement a true partnership, not a hostile takeover as in other states. And the results — striking gains in achievement in the early grades and continuous improvement on the state test — show that the arrangement is paying dividends where it counts most — raising student achievement.

In Texas, the state has not yet taken such dramatic actions, but there is some evidence that so far it has not been necessary. Accountability in Texas relies almost exclusively on the spotlight shone on performance, not the threat of state intervention. Schools — as well as parents and the community — are well aware of the accountability ratings, and everyone knows which schools are exemplary and which are low performing. As the Achieve review team heard repeatedly, "shame works," and the record seems to bear this out.

Teacher Quality

Ensuring that all students meet high standards requires above all a teaching force capable of teaching all students well. Virtually all states have a great deal of work to do in this area, particularly at a time when many states face teacher shortages. But Texas, Massachusetts and Maryland have made significant strides in building

the capacity of educators, particularly in coming up with creative methods of attracting capable people into teaching and in providing teachers with continued support. But even these three states will have to step up their efforts considerably in the coming years to bring all students to high standards.

In the area of recruitment and preparation, Massachusetts garnered attention for its high-profile "signing bonus," which provides payments of up to $20,000 for recent graduates and midcareer professionals who agree to enter teaching. This program has attracted 1,000 applicants a year from all over the country, helping the state alleviate potential shortages and broadening the pool of teacher candidates considerably. Less well known than the "bonus babies," but perhaps more significant, is the Massachusetts Institute for New Teachers (MINT), which provides intensive training and mentorships for people willing to enter teaching through alternative routes.

Massachusetts also has taken a number of steps to improve the preparation of teachers who enter the profession through traditional routes. For example, the state led the nation by requiring state institutions to publish pass rates on licensure tests. This effort helped spark myriad conversations throughout the state about improving the preparation of teachers. At the same time, the state has commendably brought higher education to the education reform table — literally, since the chancellor is now a member of the state board of education.

Texas also has done a great deal to attract well-qualified individuals into teaching. The state's alternative certification initiatives are a national model, combining strong academic coursework, mentoring, working with other candidates and field-based learning. Alternative certification has been particularly successful in helping to address teacher shortages in high-need specialties such as bilingual education and special education and to increasing diversity in the teaching ranks.

In addition, Texas requires prospective teachers to demonstrate their knowledge of the subject matter they will teach. Teacher education programs are held accountable for their students' results on these measures, and these measures are tied specifically to student standards.

Maryland, too, has tried to improve teacher preparation by strengthening standards for prospective teachers through the state's exemplary K–16 partnership. For example, all teachers in colleges of education, regardless of their subject-area concentration or teacher license areas, are required to take research-based courses in reading. Potential elementary teachers must take 15 hours total in reading instruction that include training in reading process and acquisition, instruction, materials selection, and reading assessment. Potential middle and high school teachers must take six hours of coursework in reading instruction. In addition, the state requires high school educators to earn a major in a content area (in addition to an education major). Maryland has set the most challenging passing scores in the nation for elementary teachers on the Praxis II licensure exams.

Maryland also has creative methods to attract individuals into teaching by providing signing bonuses (though not as large as Massachusetts'), tax credits and mortgage assistance. The state also provides stipends to teachers who teach in schools eligible for state reconstitution — a significant attempt to break the cycle in which the students who need the most help end up with the least qualified teachers.

Capacity Building

These three states also have invested in efforts to improve the capabilities of the teachers already in the classroom. Although significant needs persist, these efforts have helped ensure that many more teachers in each state are qualified to bring students to high standards.

One of the best-known efforts is the Texas Reading Initiative, which has become a model for a national program created as part of the No Child Left Behind Act. A huge investment in teachers' knowledge and skills, the initiative provides professional development in literacy for all teachers in kindergarten through 3rd grade. The foundation for the training is a set of early literacy standards that are national models. Among other components, the initiative also teaches teachers to use a research-based classroom assessment to diagnose reading difficulties among their students.

In addition to developing the state programs, Texas has also encouraged districts to develop their own programs for improving teacher practice. In Houston and Spring Branch, for example, the districts have developed diagnostic assessments that help teachers identify students' strengths and weaknesses throughout the school year and enable them to adjust their instruction accordingly. The results make clear that these efforts have paid off.

Massachusetts created incentives for teachers to enhance their knowledge and skills. Traditionally, teachers could hold a state certificate for life and earn salary increases solely by accumulating years in the classroom. But Massachusetts ended lifetime certification and instead required teachers to reapply for their certificates every five years and demonstrate that they had undertaken professional development that was aligned with the goals of their school and district. In addition, the state has invested in supporting candidates for certification by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards and has enlisted board-certified teachers to serve as mentors for new teachers. Massachusetts now has 185 board-certified teachers, up from seven in 1998.

Challenges Ahead

Maryland, Massachusetts and Texas have made substantial strides in raising standards and improving student achievement, and they have deserved — and won — national attention for their efforts. To be sure, the work is not completed in these three states; they each acknowledge that fact themselves. All three states face considerable hurdles in raising the bar still higher and closing the gaps even more. In many cases, the challenges ahead for these three states have roots in choices that helped lead to their successes. All three will have to make changes in light of No Child Left Behind. The choices they must make reflect tough decisions that many states must make in responding to the new federal law.

Texas

Texans rode TAAS to higher achievement with steady increases in test scores that were confirmed by NAEP, something to which few other states can point. But policymakers realized in the late 1990s that the academic demands of TAAS were too slight. This spring, students will take the state's new test for the first time with real stakes attached. Deciding where to set the bar for proficiency, then, becomes a pressing question whose answer has ramifications for other elements of the state's reforms.

Under No Child Left Behind, which is modeled after the Texas system, schools must make steady progress toward moving all groups of students to proficiency within 12 years. Where Texas sets its new bar will determine how far schools and students must travel in that time. If the gap is large, schools would need to make more improvement each year than was demanded in the state's old accountability system — essentially an increase in the passing rate of five percentage points a year.

The combination of a higher bar and stricter accountability might come as a shock in a state that has been used to slow and steady progress. How state officials handle this transition, in terms of both their policies and their communication with schools and parents, will determine their success.

When it comes to the new tests, the state will have to deal with dueling pressures. On the one hand, officials have promised a more challenging exam, one that measures the new academic standards well. On the other hand, Texas has prided itself on the incremental approach to raising the bar, so if the tests are too demanding, there is a risk of losing the support of educators. People inside and outside the state will be watching to see how different the new tests are from TAAS.

One point of scrutiny will be the state's dropout rate. Achieve came away from its Texas review unconvinced that the state's reforms have exacerbated the dropout problem, as a few researchers contend. Particularly in the case of Hispanic students, it is indisputable that Texas needs to do more to keep students in school. The current commissioner is attempting to sharpen dropout prevention efforts. If the achievement bar is raised, Texas may need to respond more aggressively with supports to help students falling behind.

During this transition to the new tests and new school ratings, nothing will be more important than communication. School reform in Texas has enjoyed a wealth of support from local educators, parents and the public, but that is largely because the messages from state leaders have been clear and consistent. As the bar is raised, the state cannot afford to take that support for granted. Everyone needs to understand why higher standards are necessary and what exactly it will mean for their schools and their children.

MASSACHUSETTS

Massachusetts has, for better or worse, become one of the nation's main testing battlegrounds. The state has pursued high standards and it is committed to making them count. That has made it a favorite target for academics and advocacy groups that do not believe in high-stakes tests.

So far, Massachusetts has weathered the criticism well. In part, that is because of the broad political and business support the reforms have had. In part, it is because the standards and tests are of very high quality and stand up well to scrutiny. But most importantly, schools that are focusing on the standards and taking advantage of resources the state has made available are seeing results.

For Massachusetts, as well as other states that have set relatively high expectations, the challenge is to implement No Child Left Behind in a way that maintains their steady course of progress.

The first temptation to lower expectations is coming this spring when the class of 2003 prepares to graduate. Although the percentage of students passing MCAS is climbing, a significant percentage of seniors have yet to pass. While minority students are proportionally over-represented among students yet to pass MCAS, most of the students at risk are white and suburban, state data shows. In all, 12,000 students still need to pass part of MCAS, and the state must find alternatives to help them achieve that goal. The pressure is on the schools to raise achievement. The pressure will be on the state to hold firm with the requirement while making sensible policy adjustments to keep the reforms on track.

In addition, as it works to add tests to create the assessment system envisioned in the new federal law, Massachusetts must maintain the quality evident in its 10th-grade exam benchmarked by Achieve.

MARYLAND

Of the three states, Maryland may be entering the greatest period of transition. The state is phasing out MSPAP, which has guided instructional practice and defined the school accountability system for the last decade. Under pressure from the federal government and local districts, the state is moving rapidly to build a new testing system and to begin implementing it in spring 2003.

In order to meet the tight development timeline, Maryland has chosen to take a series of off-the-shelf tests and augment them with questions designed to measure the Maryland standards. Moving from off-the-shelf tests to a set of exams that fully measure the state standards will be a challenge, but Maryland is committed to getting it right.

Although the goal is to ensure a smooth transition from old to new, the new tests will look very different from MSPAP and it will take districts and schools time to adjust. It will be critical that state officials communicate early and often with schools and parents about the changes and the effect they will have. As in Texas, Maryland would be wise to keep schools focused on the standards, since that is what the new tests are designed to measure.

The other major challenge confronting Maryland is the implementation of its new high school graduation exams. Because these exams are significantly more challenging than the minimum competency tests students previously had to pass, it likely will be a wake up call for some communities. Maryland has made considerable resources available to schools to prepare students for the new standards, but state and local officials will need to step up communications with parents and students to ensure they are well informed and well prepared.

* * *

Maryland, Massachusetts and Texas are well aware of the challenges they face in the years ahead, and despite their different paths, the challenges are strikingly similar. Each state will be fighting to maintain high standards in atmosphere of stricter accountability. Each state will continue to have its testing instruments scrutinized and will need to ensure their quality. Each state will need to redouble its efforts to attract and prepare quality teachers and to support them once they are in the classroom. Each state will raise standards for high school graduation and schools will need to work very hard to help students clear that bar. Each state will be lobbied to lower the bar or put off the stakes as the date the tests count draws nearer.

It is vision, coherence and strong leadership that helped these three states establish themselves as national leaders in the standards movement. These are the same qualities that will define their success as they enter the next stage of their reforms. Other states also face difficult choices about how they will improve schools; a few can claim successful records like those of Maryland, Massachusetts and Texas. It is vital for states to continue to learn from one other as they pursue the choices that make the greatest difference for students.

Time Line of Reform

Maryland

1989 Sondheim Commission report

1992 MSPAP introduced

1993 State board adopts plan for reconstituting failing schools

1999 Every Child Achieving strategy implemented to support students and schools

2000 State reconstitutes three Baltimore schools

2002 State begins revision of assessment system

2007 High school exit exam requirement will take effect

Massachusetts

1991 Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education releases *Every Child A Winner* Legislative Action Plan

1993 Education Reform Act passes

1994 Common Core of Learning adopted

1996 First set of curriculum frameworks adopted

1998 MCAS introduced

2001 Sophomores in class of 2003 take MCAS knowing it will count for the first time; scores rise dramatically

2003 High school exit exam requirement will take effect

Texas

1984 Perot Commission, House Bill 72

1990 TAAS introduced

1992 High school exit exam requirement takes effect

1994 School rating system implemented

1997 TEKS adopted

1999 Reform law ends social promotion, authorizes new test

2003 TAKS to be introduced

2005 New high school graduation requirement will take effect

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